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A Cross-Cultural Health Care Approach to Improve Veteran Health Services in an Academic Community Hospital

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A Cross-cultural Health Care Approach to Improve Veteran Health Services in an Academic Community Hospital

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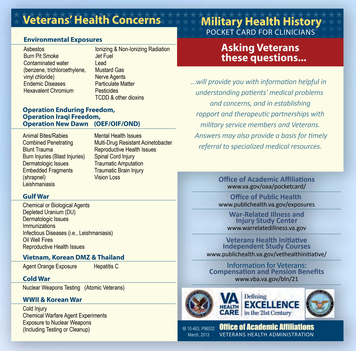
Rationale:

- **Cross-cultural care:** High quality health care provision requires clinicians to align diagnostic and treatment regimens with their patients' (and families') cultural backgrounds and preferences.
- **Military culture:** Military service (for active duty, guard and reserve component personnel as well as the over 20 million veterans) is a significant component of cultural background that contributes to overall health status, morbidities and use of health care services.
- **Veteran care in civilian health system:** Even though Veterans Administration health services are available throughout the country, community (civilian) hospitals are a significant source of health care for many veterans. Sixty percent of veterans receive health care in the civilian medical system (VA, 2011).
- **Clinician awareness:** Veterans may exhibit service-related symptoms that will go undiagnosed (and untreated) without clinician knowledge of past military experience.
- **Military values:** Aspects of military culture (such as "selfless service," or "devotion to duty") may be a factor in seeking timely health care services. Understanding a patient's military background will facilitate the delivery of cross-cultural, patient-centered care.
- **Social and family needs:** Beyond biomedical conditions, veterans and their families have social needs that clinical encounters or hospitalizations can address.
- **Health system capabilities:** Activities that raise awareness of these particular needs and community services will aid clinicians and other health care colleagues in providing high quality care to veterans.

Veteran Health Initiative:

Lehigh Valley Health Network (Allentown, Pennsylvania) launched a veteran health initiative in 2012 to enhance cross-cultural care for patients (and their families) with current and past military experience. Strategies have included:

- Standard screening of all patients to record and track past and current military service
  - "Have you served on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces and/or were you activated, into active duty, as a member of the National Guard or as a Reservist?"
- Clinical education on veteran-specific morbidities and support systems
  - Examples include Medical Grand Rounds sessions, Surgical Grand Rounds sessions, Schwartz Rounds
- Peer support for patients and employees who are veterans, as well as those employees with family members on active duty, and
- Special events (Memorial Day observances and Veterans Day Celebrations) to increase awareness of and appreciation for military personnel and veterans within our organization and community.



Specific aspects of this initiative have been critical to its success, including:

- Leadership endorsement (several senior management officers are veterans and their advocacy gave the initiative legitimacy and significance within the complex organizational culture),
- Alignment of this approach within the health network's cultural awareness initiative (this linkage framed the veteran health project within an already familiar network program and promoted recognizable cross-cultural skills, a patient-based approach, that were applied to patients with current and past military service),
- Engagement of health network employees with military background in the planning and implementation of initiative strategies, and
- Collaboration with other regional health care organizations that share the same overall goal of improved veteran health.

Results:

- Establishment of Veterans Affairs Liaison Officer position. VALO assists clinicians with service-related health questions as well as relevant care coordination.
- Improved determination of government payer eligibility and examination of reimbursement procedures/strategies to assure effective payment of claims for health services for veterans.
- Employee engagement increased for LVHN colleagues who serve as veteran champions and operationalize this initiative.
- Community-wide, standardized patient screening processes; joint continuing education events on military culture and joint CEO-level engagement to improve health services for local veterans

Lehigh Valley Health Network Description:

Lehigh Valley Health Network includes three hospital campuses - two in Allentown and one in Bethlehem, Pa.; nine health centers caring for communities in four counties; numerous primary and specialty care physician practices throughout the region. Specialty care includes: trauma care at the region's busiest, most-experienced trauma center treating adults and children, burn care at the regional Burn Center, kidney and pancreas transplants; perinatal/neonatal, cardiac, cancer care, neurology, and complex neurosurgery capabilities including national certification as a Comprehensive Stroke Center. Children's Hospital at Lehigh Valley Hospital, the only children's hospital in the region, provides care in 28 specialties and general pediatrics. Lehigh Valley Health Network has been recognized by *US News & World Report* for 18 consecutive years as one of America's Best Hospitals and is a national Magnet hospital for excellence in nursing.

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